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ABSTRACT

Idiomatic expressions in American English provide an important clue to the speaker's values and attitudes, many of which are represented in bipolar language (e.g., "warm hearted"-"cold blooded," "walking on air"-"feeling low"). Most bipolar idiomatic continua which predict meaning also reveal positive and negative evaluations connected with seemingly unrelated things, such as up-down, hot-cold, integrated-disintegrated, smooth-rough, open-closed, inclusion-exclusion, bodily acceptance-rejection, and color. Educators and therapists who need to facilitate communication should recognize the importance of idiomatic language in interpersonal exchanges. (JM)

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LISTENING TO COLOR

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Today one is almost embarrassed to present any ideas that are not based on statistics, that have not been run through the computer. However, some of the most astute observations in the field of rhetoric were made several thousand years ago by Aristotle who had no computer available. He observed how people reacted and to what they reacted and noted this. In more recent times in the area of psychology, Harry Harlow wrote in a very personal style as he observed the effects of a home environment on the development of a chimpanzee. He was no less a scientist in his methodology and observation than is the statistician. On a much humbler scale, today I want to present not a body of findings, but an organizational tool for predicting the emotional values of idiomatic expressions in the English language--with examples of application of that tool. That conceptualization is what I want to share with you that you may apply it when you are listening--interacting--in small groups or in interpersonal exchanges in parental, business, therapeutic or academic settings.

As early as the 1930's, Korzybski noted in Science and Sanity, the danger of bipolar language and thinking. He explicated this, but he did not eradicate it as indicated by a poem that appeared in a textbook we used at the University of Houston a few years ago, "If white is good and black is bad, Then all my friends are grey or plaid." We are still fighting the bipolar battle in our

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thinking. And many of our values are still represented in bipolar language. You can readily see our value system no matter where you tap the continuum.

An examination of a color continua shows that "colorful" is very positively connotated,almost all specific colors are negative, and "colorless" is considered very negative. Listening to colors increases interpersonal understanding and we will explore that in just a few moments.

I discovered the continua when working with some of the international students who had learned textbook, King's English in their native lands. Sentences these students encountered baffled them, although they could provide literal definitions for every word. Consider this not unusual combination: "He nailed us, the big chicken. Now the lid's going to blow and all hell's to pay." Teachers would find it difficult to unravel the entirity of American idioms and correct phonemic distortion or omission in a single course. But the international student needs the information to function in classrooms and socially.

The first client who told his therapist to "Cool it." was not requesting a thermostat adjustment. We all know now that he was asking for a less emotional, more remote approach. The temperature continuum is one of the most useful for the prediction of meaning of unfamiliar idioms and least contaminated by exceptions.

February 1976 Psychology Today offered these examples of sexual high emotion: "hot pants", "flame of love", "fire of passions", and "old flame" and you will recognize the anger in "hot under the collar", "the heat's on", "boiling mad", "in hot water", and "hot headed". Nearer the center, idioms more temperate, "warm hearted" or "smiling warmly", still indicate emotion, but at a level that is pleasurable, rather than dangerous. At the center and nearly without emotional orientation stand unenthusiastic idioms--"luke-warm

reception" and "couldn't warm up to the idea." "Keep cool," and "cool headed" illustrate the beginning of the portion of the continuum that values intellectual processes over emotional ones. Extreme rationality, devoid of emotion, is called "cold," "cold blooded," and may be indicated by an "icy stare." No wonder unresponsive women are called "frigid."

These value-laden continua reveal much about our society. As current laws reflect codified moral judgements of a society's recent past, so language is a less formal but equally intriguing mirror.

With explication of about a dozen continua, students become quite proficient at estimating meanings. Few of the continua will enable perfect prediction of meaning every time. Just as spelling rules have exceptions, so are there times these guidelines fail. Perhaps an anology to experimental psychology's .05 level of significance is appropriate. In most circumstances, we must be content if expectations are met 95 times out of 100.

Psychology Today challenged readers to reverse the bigotry of our language. "Black hearted, black thoughts, the Black Death (plague) and "black magic" were contrasted to "white magic" and "Snow White". As a starter the challenger offered "in the black" and "white as a ghost". Eight months later the readers' contributions were published. Black positives included "Black beauty, black belt (karate), black gold (oil), flashing black eyes, blacksmith, black tie, black friar, black soil, Black Bottom (dance), black pearls". White negatives included "White House, white belt (karate), white trash, whitewash, white flag (surrender), white feather (cowardice) white slave (prostitute), white elephant, white plague (TB), whitecap (rough water),white as a sheet, men in white coats, lily white, lily livered".

However, in general, the continua not only enable meaning prediction but reveal the positive and negative evaluations connected with seemingly

unrelated things as up-down, hot-cold, integrated-disintegrated, smooth-rough, open-closed, inclusion-exclusion, bodily acceptance-rejection, and the strangest of all--color.

A quotation from Paul Gallico's novel, The Poseidon Adventure, (1972) illustrates the idiomatic attachment of values. In the novel people, trapped in an overturned ship, climb for six hours toward the hull. The ship is relentlessly sinking; the conditions are terrifying, but the band of survivors continue to climb under the leadership of a minister. A doubter asks, "So, then, is there any use we should keep on climbing up like this?"

The minister responds, "Yes, because we are human beings responsible to ourselves."

"The simple statement rang through Muller like a bell and for the first time he felt he understood something of the character of this ecclesiastical athlete and his climb, as well as himself for following him; the goal they had set themselves in the face of almost insurmountable obstacles and a well nigh hopeless situation.

"Up had always been good; down was bad. God and Heaven were up; Hell and the Devil were down. The road to damnation was the downward path. Resurrection was ascent. Phrases rang through his ears: 'So-and-So is rising in the world. He's on his way up. ...Poor ole You-Know-Who is slipping they say. Losing his grip. If he doesn't watch his step, he'll be down and out.' Down and out! Up and safe on top of the heap. Man's whole history had been an ascent . . . upwards, always upward out of the ooze and slime of the sea, on to the land, higher and now reaching out his arms to the planets. His mythology created the dwellers underground as misshapen dwarfs and monsters, the creatures of the upper air were exquisite, graceful, winged fantasies of light."

"Where else, indeed, was there to go but up, as long as one had a single breath left in one's body? ... Was it really the hope of a miracle of rescue that was driving them onwards, or the curious hypnotism of the climb itself, the very upness of it? They had protested and quarrelled, balked, and tried to shirk, all but given up. But always they come back to the striving aloft."

Nor are novelists singular in noting the value system carried in idiomatic language. Dorothy Spoerl (1943) found more bilingual subjects than controls responded to the word "society" with words and phrases indicating higher status--"high class", "big shots", and "snob".

You will all recognize the positive and negative poles of the height and depth continuum. Most everyone would prefer being an overlord to being "under someone's thumb" or "under the lash". There is a relatively neutral point at the earth's surface. "Both feet on the ground" still leaves one's "head in the air" and someone who is "down to earth" is practical but not necessarily pleasant nor blessed. Contrast this with positive expression of feeling or being fortunate--"King of the Hill", "flying high", "eating high on the hog", "top of the heap", "head in the clouds", "walking on air", "high as a kite" (whether in love, or on drugs or liquor, the individual described as "high as a kite" is himself felling good, at least temporarily). We even "dress up". An apparent exception, "being blown sky high", really belongs to another continua, that of integration versus fragmentation. The negative pole contains idioms resembling these: "feeling low", "a low-lifer", "lower than a snake's belly", "he's in the hole", "on his way down", or "down and out".

"Down and out" suggests another continuum which could be called an inclusion-exclusion value continua. With due credit to W. C. Schutz, our value system says Joy is to be "in", and to be "out" is sad. To be in the

"center of things" is desirable, but to be on the "fringes" indicates lack of acceptance or credentials.

Naturally many idioms deal with our own bodies. The continua on which these idiomatic expressions can be understood inclusion-exclusion or acceptance-rejection or incorporation-expulsion. We "take someone in" if we sympathize with his plight or "turn him out" if he is a poor houseguest. We "swallow" a story if we believe it, but "can't swallow it" if we think it implausible. Sometimes our own white lies "stick in our throat".

The most surprising of the continua deals with color--surprising because it's so predominately negative, although the work "colorful" usually carries positive connotations. To be full of color, however, has few advantages: He's in a black mood and she's feeling blue, too. Their friend is yellow and a little green behind the ears. She sees red when she remembers being bled white by the stranger with a gray personality in the days when she wore rose colored-glasses. The only encouraging color idioms are those involving "good guys" in western films. They wear white hats and are in the pink. Most people want a good tan on their skin but don't want anyone to tan their hid. It's acceptable to have a colorful personality but hard to understand "why" considering the negative values attached to most color idioms.

Integration was a well chosen name for a procedure that was not universally welcomed because the idioms associated with integration are positively valued: "He has it all together. She's put together right. They are a close-knit group and their ideas hang together." People who are upset need to "pull themselves together". The other side, disintegration or fragmentation, is associated with negative values: "She flew all apart and he lost his head and blew up so the marriage cracked up. When the vows were broken, family ties

loosened and the children came unglued--acted as if they had holes in their heads". "The Watergate story is full of holes and won't hold together."

Roger Brown (1965, p. 295) speculated that as a mother expands a child's first attempts to use the English language, "she may be teaching something like a world-view." American parents, employing current idioms in dialogue with their children, are certainly conveying our society's evaluations of the world we view. Therapists or educators who need to facilitate communication may find careful attention to idiomatic language provides an important clue to the speaker's values and attitudes.

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